

PRIME NEWS

Racing against time to save our rhinos

UPHILL TASK:

Despite many failed bids to conserve the Sumatran rhinoceros, experts are not giving up

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NOT so long ago, hopes were high on finding the Sumatran rhinoceros in the wild in Sabah. It was one of the rarest species in the world and an all out effort was undertaken to prevent it from becoming extinct.

Despite the optimism, backed with a belief that there could be about 30 or more wild rhinos in the state, only three were caught in the last 20 years. Flags were raised recently to urgently conserve the species as reality sank in.

In May, state Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Masidi Manjun revealed that the three captive rhinos were possibly the only ones left in the country.

"We are facing the prospect of our Sumatran rhinos going extinct in our lifetime," he said.

The following month, an international scientific journal on conser-

vation, *Oryx*, published a report with a similar conclusion, confirming what Masidi said.

Conservation efforts began in 2000 by an organisation called SOS Rhino, later renamed SOS Rhino Borneo, and eventually became the Borneo Rhino Alliance or Bora.

For more than a decade, teams of trackers, rangers and scientists were routinely despatched into jungles to track down Sumatran rhinos at the slightest word, or evidence, of its possible existence.

Two potential areas identified as the animal's habitat were the 120,000ha Tabin Wildlife Reserve and 80,000ha Danum Valley conservation area, both in Lahad Datu. But surveys were also conducted in other forests in the east coast of Sabah.

Soon, telltale signs began appearing and by 2008, a male rhino was caught outside of Tabin at a plantation owned by Kertam Holdings, where it got its namesake.

A captive female known as Gelugub was available back then, but all attempts failed to produce any offspring from the two.

The age of the female rhino, caught in Kinabatangan in 1994, might have been a factor that contributed to its infertility.

Then, in 2011, a female with a severed front left hoof was caught. This was four years after it was first discovered within the Tabin Wildlife Reserve. Hopes withered as it was discovered that it had cysts in its reproductive organs.

Last year, another potential mate was found for Kertam at the Danum Valley conservation area, but like the others, Iman, as it was eventually named, had a tumour as big as a football in her uterus.

Bora executive director Datuk Junaidy Payne, who is also co-author of the report published in *Oryx*, had said a number of baby Sumatran rhinos must be produced to save the species from extinction.

"The only way now to achieve that is to use in vitro fertilisation to produce the embryos, and to have a few fertile females in well-managed facilities and excellent care for the surrogate mothers."

To do this, Payne had suggested that all parties work together as each rhino needed to be closely managed to ensure the survival of the species.

Echoing similar sentiments in a statement recently, Rasmus Gren Havmøller, the lead author of the *Oryx* report on the rhinos, said the key to saving the species relied on whether "all remaining Sumatran rhinos are viewed as a metapopulation".

This meant that all should be managed in a single programme across national and international borders in order to maximise the overall birth rate, including individual ani-



Precious few

Borneo Rhino Alliance provides protection and monitoring of possibly the last three Sumatran rhinos in Malaysia.

Sabah's rhino is a distinct subspecies of the Sumatran rhino, known as the Bornean rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*).

INFOGRAPHIC: NST



Kertam

- **Male.**
- Found at a plantation owned by Kertam Holdings near the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Lahad Datu in 2008.
- Weighs over 600 kilograms.
- Kertam was trapped after it was spotted several times at a plantation adjacent to a small plot of forest where it roamed.
- It was believed Kertam had 'surrendered' and left its territory, which had become smaller after the clearing of surrounding forests.



Puntung

- **Female.**
- Caught in a trap within the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in 2011.
- Weighs over 500kg.
- Distinctively identified by its severed front left hoof.
- Puntung was first discovered by a rhino survey team through its tracks and droppings in an area called Melanta Bula, within the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in 2007.
- It was discovered that Puntung had cysts in its reproductive organs.



Iman

- **Female.**
- Caught in a trap at the Danum Valley conservation area last year.
- Weighs over 500kg.
- First discovered by camera trap in 2013 in an area called Lubuk Iman.
- A trap was set and Iman was eventually captured after slightly over a year.
- It has a tumour in its uterus about the size of a football, weighing around 5kg.

mals held in captivity, he said.

In Indonesia, there are about 100 Sumatran rhinos in the wild and five in captivity. There is also a male rhinoceros at the Cincinnati Zoo in the United States.

Sperm and egg cells had been collected from the three rhinos in the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in the hope that a surrogate mother could be found someday.

Experts from Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute in Serdang, Selangor, and Leibniz Institute of Wildlife in Berlin, Ger-

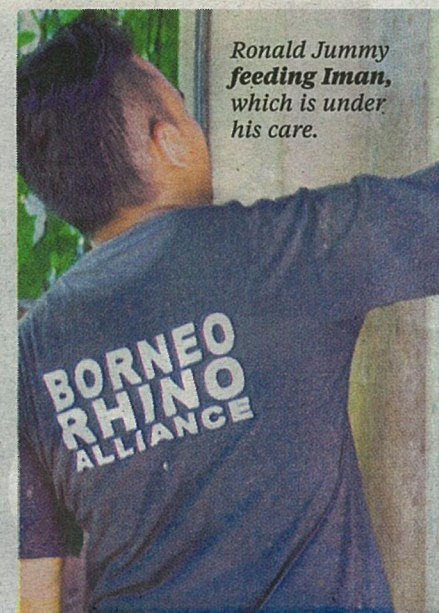
many, are working with Bora to achieve this. An obvious option to save the rhinos from extinction would be to work with Indonesia.

Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar said he would bring up the possibility of a rhino breeding programme when he meets his Indonesian counterpart, Siti Burbaya of the Forestry and Environment Ministry, soon.

Sabah Wildlife director William Baya had said to save the rhinos from extinction, Malaysia and Indonesia had to work together.

"I hope this will happen sooner rather than later as the Sumatran rhinos are living on borrowed time."

Kertam the Sumatran rhinoceros heading for its mud pit at the Borneo Rhinoceros Sanctuary in the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Lahad Datu. Pix by Roy Goh



Ronald Jummy feeding Iman, which is under his care.

Tracker recounts face-to-face encounter with rhino

BIG and sluggish, the Sumatran rhinoceros exudes much pride as it moves in the jungle. It will mark its territory with mud droppings, droppings and plate-sized hoof tracks.

Repeated snorts tell it is agitated. A bellow can be heard from far when it runs and the stomps will make the ground shake.

But for 10 years, Justin Sigunting had only encountered the mysterious dinosaur-like mammals twice, despite having explored the jungles of Sabah to find it.

The two encounters in a space of three years were with a female rhino, now under his care at the Borneo Rhinoceros Sanctuary in the 120,000ha Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Lahad Datu.

"Maybe I'm just lucky," said Justin, 35, who used to be a full-time tracker for SOS Rhino Borneo, now called the Borneo Rhino Alliance, or Bora.

The organisation was formed to prevent the extinction of the species.

He still works for Bora as the keep-



"The first time I stumbled on Puntung was in 2008. I was with fellow tracker Marikus (Suyat) and we were on her path. She charged straight at us, forcing us to run in separate directions and find a nearest tree."

Justin Sigunting
keeper of Puntung

er of Puntung, the female rhino with a severed left hoof that was caught in the Melanta Bula area of Tabin in 2011. It is one of three rhinos — together with a male named Kertam, and another female named Iman — kept under the care of Bora.

"The first time I stumbled on Pun-

tung was in 2008. I was with fellow tracker Marikus (Suyat) and we were on her path. She charged straight at us, forcing us to run in separate directions and find the nearest tree."

He said they could avoid being trampled by a rhino by taking cover behind a tree or running around it.

Marikus, 44, said they were literally running for their lives.

"I would laugh about it now but looking back, I recalled feeling it was either Justin or me. Fortunately, Puntung ran straight past and did not chase either one of us," he said.

But it took a good 15 to 20 minutes to calm their nerves and walk away.

Sumatran rhinos are known to be solitary animals and will fiercely defend their territory. They also have a strong sense of smell and, to assert its dominance, new visitors at the sanctuary will be greeted with uneasy snorts by the three captive rhinos.

The second time Justin saw Puntung was in 2011 and he was with another tracker, Rasaman Jaya.

"Both of us were on a tree near a mud pit at the time and we saw her from a safe distance," said Rasaman, who now looks after Iman.

Justin, Marikus and Rasaman, along with former trackers Joseph Stimon and Alvin Erut, are still standing by in case more rhinoceros were found in the state.

"We will be despatched to locations where traces of their presence are discovered, like tracks or wallowing pits, but so far, after the capture of Iman, we have yet to find any more," Rasaman said.

He said there was one occasion when they were sent to the Danum Valley conservation area but the tracks they found were that of a baby elephant, which was mistaken for a rhino's.

For Marikus, there might be a few rhinos still out there in the wild but finding them would not be easy.

"The jungle is big and it's not just Tabin or Danum, but there are also others like Kalabakan, Kinabatangan, Kulamba and Tongod. Look at me, I was out there looking for rhinos all these years and only saw it once.

"I remember back then, when we found its tracks, droppings or scratch marks on trees, it was like hitting the lottery or finding gold.

"It's hard to say for sure but maybe if we look harder, there could some out there."

Let's hope Marikus is right.

Keepers can't bear thought of species they share a bond with becoming extinct

IT is hard to convince Wilson Kunttil that there are no more rhinoceros in Malaysia. The 35-year-old caretaker of possibly the last three Sumatran rhinos in the country refuses to believe it.

"It's hard for me to accept this. I know many scientists say it's going extinct, and I know many out there in the jungle looking for the rhinos will say the same thing. But I can't get myself to say they are gone. I don't want it to go extinct," said the head keeper at the Borneo Rhinoceros Sanctuary at the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Lahad Datu.

"If you have looked after one as long as I have, maybe you will feel the same way," said the Borneo Rhino Alliance (Bora) worker with a faint smile.

For five years, Wilson has looked after Kertam, the only male among three living in the sanctuary. He is hoping against all odds that things will turn out for the better.

The two females are Puntung and Iman, both deemed by experts as incapable of naturally bearing any offspring for Kertam.

"I am no expert but if it's one thing I know, it's how to look after Kertam and I will make sure he is in the best of shape when a suitable partner is found for him."

Then, he turned and called out to Kertam: "Boleh kan Tam Tam?"

Kertam turned its head, snorted and went back to wallowing in its mud pit.

Wilson and six other keepers look after the three rhinos round the clock. They feed, clean, nurse and protect them within a paddock that leads to an enclosed jungle, where the trio roam.

The keepers live in quarters just a few metres away from the paddock. Everyday, they take turns to inspect the three fenced jungle areas, one each for the rhinos.

During bad weather, they risk their lives going inside the beasts' territories to make sure all three are safe from fallen trees. Another team is in charge of growing plants of leaves, shoots and fruits to feed the rhinos.

Since Bora began its programme in 2010, more than 120 species of plants have been identified as food for the rhinos, although each of the three has its own preference.

Ronald Jummy, who chats with Iman during feeding time, says it has become a habit for him as he con-



Wilson Kunttil checking on **Kertam** at the Borneo Rhinoceros Sanctuary paddock in the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Lahad Datu.

siders the rhino like his own child.

"Sometimes, Iman will be choosy, sometimes moody, but there are days when she can be friendly and playful," said the 29-year-old keeper, who rewards the rhino with a rub on its ears if "she is a good girl".

Despite his attachment to Iman, which has been under his care for over a year since its capture in Danum Valley, he knows his limits.

"A rhino is a big animal and a small nudge can knock you down. Iman is the most aggressive of the three because she's not used to people, unlike Kertam and Puntung, that have been in captivity much longer."

Samat Gubin, who looks after Puntung, says they prepare the food and hand-feed the rhinos twice daily.

"After feeding, the rhinos will go back to their jungles and wallow in

mud," he said, adding that food will also be tied in branches nearby in case "they get hungry at night".

Apart from occasional snorts and faint squeaks they make while eating, the rhinos do not make much noise.

"It's only when they see each other or mate, then you can hear them from as far as 1km away," Gubin said, describing the eerie bellowing that rhinos make when they fight or warn their enemies.

Bora field manager and veterinarian Dr Zainal Zainuddin says there have been a few unsuccessful attempts by Kertam to mate with Puntung.

"For big animals, mating is a complicated process and for rhinos, in

particular, the male needs to win over Puntung before she will allow any advances. To do that, the two will fight. The act of mounting a female, too, is a big effort for a male as it will need to conserve its energy for that."

Dr Zainal says the rhinos will also be protective of its own territory and react to the slightest whiff of "intruders" with its strong sense of smell. For now, with Puntung or Iman not in the best of health, the field team has to collect the sperm from Kertam and eggs from the two females.

"We have a highly-dedicated team here who treats the three rhinos with great respect and care. We just have to," he said.



Samat Gubin